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Reflections on fieldwork: A view from Amazonia

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Amazonia is both a place of exceptional linguistic, sociocultural, and ecological diversity and a place where the documentation of this diversity is limited and ever-increasingly urgent. While recent decades have shown considerable progress in this area, our understanding of Amazonian languages is still challenged by a low proportion of researchers relative to its many distinct language contexts. In light of Himmelmann's framing of language documentation as a 'fairly independent field of linguistic inquiry and practice', we discuss key facets of what we consider the single most important unifying question that underlies language documentation work in Amazonia: Just how much description and analysis is necessary for Amazonian language documentation to be coherent, useful, and interpretable by others? We argue that the social and cultural diversity of this vast region calls into question the actual separability of 'documentation' from 'description and analysis' of Amazonian language data; and we advocate for taking Himmelmann's proposals as an invitation to finer-grained, broader-minded thinking about the kinds of research questions, methods, and focused training that best serve linguists working in Amazonian speech communities, rather than as a guide to defining an appropriate scope for fieldwork with an Amazonian language.

1. Introduction Amazonia is a place of exceptional linguistic, sociocultural, and ecological diversity[1]—and a place where the documentation of this diversity is both limited and ever-increasingly urgent. At the heart of what Lyon (1974) dubbed the

[1]The area encompassing the Amazon and Orinoco river basins is home to some 300 indigenous languages corresponding to over 50 distinct 'genealogical' units, of which the majority are very small families or isolates (see Rodrigues 2000; Epps & Salanova 2013).

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"least-known continent", Amazonia itself was described just twenty years ago as being "still in places a linguistic black box" (Grinevald 1998: 126). While the intervening two decades have seen considerable progress, our understanding of Amazonian languages is still challenged by a low proportion of researchers relative to the many distinct language contexts spread across its roughly 2.9 million square miles. Today, two decades after both Grinevald's assessment and Himmelmann's landmark paper on language documentation, a reflection on the state of linguistic fieldwork in Amazonia seems especially fitting.

In this paper, we discuss multiple facets—holistic and conceptual, as well as practical and methodological—of what we consider the single most important unifying question that underlies language documentation work in Amazonia, in light of Himmelmann's framing of language documentation as a "fairly independent field of linguistic inquiry and practice" (1998: 161) and the still-acute need for high-quality documentation work in the region: Just how much description and analysis is necessary for Amazonian language documentation to be coherent, useful, and interpretable by others?

Speaking from our own experiences working on-the-ground in the Amazonian context, we argue that the social and cultural diversity of this vast region calls into question the actual separability of 'documentation' from 'analysis' of Amazonian language data. We advocate for taking Himmelmann's proposals as an invitation to finer-grained, broader-minded thinking about the kinds of research questions, methods, and focused training that best serve a linguist working in an Amazonian speech community, rather than as a guide to defining an appropriate scope for one's relationship to an Amazonian language.

We begin in §2 by providing some historical context to our discussion. In §3, we highlight key characteristics of the research context in Amazonia; and in §4, we outline key constraints on Amazonian fieldwork. Finally, in §5, we suggest areas to prioritize in future documentation work in Amazonia.

2. Where we've been: a brief history of language documentation in Amazonia

Until recent decades, the socio-geographic impenetrability of the Amazonian region limited outside observers to an intrepid, well-funded few, most with non-scientific motivations. Prior to the 1990s, linguistic documentation/description in Amazonia was largely associated with missionary endeavors, from the early Jesuit grammars and catechisms of the 16th and 17th centuries, to the SIL dictionaries and grammars of the 20th century. While valuable, much of this early material is limited in scope and accessibility—for example, dictionaries with dozens of words glossed 'fish sp.', grammar sketches in opaque tagmemic framework, and texts limited to Bible translations. Corpora of natural discourse prior to the 1990s are rare and generally limited to a handful of traditional stories. In some cases, more substantial documentation was created by anthropologists, but much of this material lacks linguistically-informed transcription/translation. Vanishingly few materials were made accessible through archiving or as published text collections until quite recently.

The last twenty years have seen major advances in the documentation of Amazonian languages. There has been a significant increase in Latin American scholars working in Amazonia, especially in Brazil, and more foreign scholars have been drawn to the region as well. Increased discipline-wide attention to language documentation has not only stimulated more work; it has also fostered the development of higher standards for documentary collections, including a valorization of rich contextualization and stylistic diversity. Accessibility has also become a priority, and many collections are now widely

available in recently established digital repositories such as AILLA, ELAR, and others (see e.g. Seyfeddinipur et al. forthcoming). Fieldwork in Amazonia has clearly benefited from the international expansion of funding infrastructure, especially the NSF-DEL, ELDP, and DOBES initiatives. These developments have resulted in a relative explosion of high-quality work in Amazonia, including significant text collections, diverse new digital corpora for small and endangered languages, and some excellent descriptive materials—most notably, comprehensive reference grammars grounded in text collections that are openly accessible in digital archives (e.g. Stenzel 2013, Mihas 2015, Zariquiey 2018).

Despite these strides, there is still a tremendous amount of linguistic work to do in Amazonia, and many of the same socio-geographic obstacles remain in place. Many languages still lack basic descriptions, and we have even less information about known types of variation within Amazonian languages—dialects and dialect continua, registers, genderlects, etc.—which demand both documentation and close, context-sensitive analysis, not only to make sense of the variation that occurs within a corpus but also to guide the very process of collection.

At the same time, the contemporary social, political, and economic circumstances of many Amazonian languages make the task increasingly more urgent, as these pressures accompany massive shifts to local lingua francas. Moreover, the devastating colonial history of the region—which produced enduring social structures that are deeply devaluing of indigenous languages, knowledge, and lifeways—has left a legacy in which it is often difficult for researchers to establish the trust necessary for respectful and truly collaborative relationships (see also Dobrin & Schwartz 2016).

Our observations here are informed by our many years' collective experience doing linguistic and anthropological fieldwork in Amazonia, as well as training others to work in the region. Our experiences range from work led by a single researcher to team-based projects, involving students and scholars from both outside and inside Latin America, and both closer and looser partnerships with community members.[2]

3. Building context-sensitive documentation The central proposal of Himmelmann's (1998: 161) discussion is that "documentary linguistics be conceived of as a fairly independent field of linguistic inquiry and practice that is no longer linked exclusively to the descriptive framework." In our view, this proposal is on one hand exactly on target, while on the other hand it requires some important caveats for work with Amazonian languages. Stepping away from the discipline's prior narrow focus on "the descriptive concept of language as a system of units and regularities" (Himmelmann 1998: 164) and toward a broader focus on the whole of a language—within a broader communicative spectrum, which may be multilingual—is essential in the Amazonian context, and our position here is that even the most 'basic' description of a language requires substantial contextualizing work to make it both accurate and comprehensible. But we also submit that the contextualizing work appropriate to Amazonia goes well beyond what many linguists are prepared for. As we elaborate below, the particular features of the Amazonian milieu exhort of us not only a deep awareness of the social and cultural contexts that are home to the language(s), but also a methodological approach that invests in achieving some

[2]Beier began her long-term relationship with Amazonian peoples and languages in Peru in 1995; Epps in Brazil in 2000. We both are deeply grateful to all of our collaborators and funders over the years, and we take sole responsibility for the views expressed here.

communicative competence,[3] makes time for participant-observation within the community, and makes a commitment to ethnography as part of the documentation process.

From our perspective, producing high-quality documentation that is both accurate and interpretable requires of us a coherent *understanding* of the social, cultural, and linguistic contexts in which we are working, both on the intellectual/professional and the ethical/interpersonal levels. This point is relevant in every context, as argued compellingly by Dobrin (2008), who explores a number of foundational ways in which the value systems and priorities of researchers and speech communities can diverge. In Amazonia, at least, we consider it to be a methodological imperative.

Arguably, reaching an appropriate level of understanding may be particularly challenging in Amazonia, where "little-known" (Himmelmann 1998: 161) languages are generally spoken by 'little-known' peoples, whose knowledge systems, value systems, sociopolitical priorities, etc. must be learned, not presupposed. The cultural differences between the local context and a linguist's background are often very deep, even when the linguist is from the relevant country—and in Amazonia it is very rare for speech community members to lead language documentation projects, especially with a comparable level of training and funding. The process of understanding therefore necessarily involves *analysis* on various levels and with various foci—linguistic, ethnographic, and social. Informed choices about what, when, how, etc. to document depend on this analysis, just as a long-term engagement between a researcher and a community depends on developing mutual understanding to the point that all parties feel comfortable and committed. For example, it is generally expected that a robust documentation of natural discourse will include genres, registers, and styles that are particularly valued by the community; yet sometimes that valuation also corresponds to a heightened sensitivity toward sharing the material with outsiders—whether in light of community norms, negative attitudes on the part of the national society and/or missionaries, or other factors (see e.g. Epps et al. forthcoming).

Thus, for many scholars working in Amazonia, the work of language *documentation* cannot be easily or usefully separated from the work of *description*, just as a focus on *language* cannot be easily or usefully disentangled from an engagement with *culture*. Recognizing that the goals and methods of documentation and description are meaningfully distinct has without a doubt fostered key conceptual innovations in the best practices of our field. However, in light of the shortage of personnel working with any given language or speech community in Amazonia; the likelihood that a linguist's work may be the first and/or the last work ever done in that setting; and the need for substantial 'descriptive' work in order to make a documentation interpretable by others, we have found that the supposed *separability* of these two activities fails to be appropriate in the majority of settings in Amazonia.

4. Practical constraints on documentation It is of course not an accident that Amazonia's linguistic diversity is severely under-documented. In addition to the cultural challenges that many researchers face, language documentation in the region is confronted by a constellation of practical obstacles.

We turn first to the challenges faced by linguists who come from outside the regional or national context. One set of challenges relates to navigating Amazonian

[3]In Amazonia, one of the most widespread requirements for building trust is an outsider's willingness to communicate in the local language.

infrastructures—or the lack thereof—which can be discouragingly difficult, especially for first-timers. The most fundamental steps—getting permissions, gathering resources, getting around over vast distances—are often fraught with complications. In some cases, national policies may actively disfavor or even exclude foreign researchers, often in light of political relations involving their home country.[4] The day-to-day practical realities of living and working in communities without running water, electricity, or even outhouses can present additional disincentives. In longer-term perspective, even scholars who have carried out successful fieldwork may find it difficult to sustain a research program and collaborative community relationships over time, especially when their home base is far from the region or country where their research takes place.

An additional challenge for many outsiders involves working through a contact language that they do not speak fluently. Most Amazonian languages are spoken in Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking matrix societies; moreover, there are major differences among the varieties of Spanish and Portuguese spoken throughout Amazonia. In Peru, for example, the Spanish of Lima is sufficiently different from the Spanish of rural Loreto that serious attention must be paid to issues of translatability from indigenous languages to the local variety of Spanish to a more internationally-accessible variety of Spanish—and thence to English for most publications. This issue is relevant both to the competent execution of fieldwork and to the nature of its outcomes, including the multiple translations of a documentation necessary for it to be interpretable by multiple audiences.

Linguists who come from within Amazonian regional and national contexts also encounter an array of obstacles to doing language documentation/description. Some of these overlap with those noted above, while many more are structural and financial, varying by country. Crucially, local opportunities for training often do not provide nationally- or regionally-based scholars with the breadth of knowledge, methods, sensitization, tools, funding, professional returns, etc. that they need to do robust documentary/descriptive work.

For linguists or prospective linguists coming from within Amazonian indigenous speech communities, the challenges are in many respects the most daunting. Between local educational realities and national disciplinary priorities, it is extremely difficult and rare for indigenous individuals to pursue advanced education directed toward language documentation. Without such training, it is nearly impossible for them to secure funding, buy equipment, or carry out work according to contemporary standards for best practices. Unfortunately, to this day there are vanishingly few well-trained linguists who are themselves members of Amazonian indigenous communities.

Finally, even those scholars—from any background—who have access to state-of-the-art instruction in linguistics are still unlikely to receive the wide range of training that best serves documentary/descriptive fieldwork in a region like Amazonia. Across the discipline, field methods training is quite limited in scope and duration, and tends to be woefully inadequate on the 'culture and society' factors inherent to robust documentation—an issue especially pressing for work with small, under-studied Amazonian societies and speech communities. Yet, because of the political economy of the discipline, there is rarely an easy way to offer significantly greater depth and breadth of training. For formally-trained linguists who choose to branch out into language

[4]For example, Venezuelan languages are among the least-documented, due in part to Venezuelan national policies regarding researchers from a range of countries on the one hand, and relative lack of support or training in documentation for local scholars on the other.

documentation/description later in their career, the availability of thorough methods training is likely to be even less.

5. Priorities for the future In light of the challenges addressed above, we outline here what we see as important priorities for the future of language documentation, with emphasis on the Amazonian context.

Disciplinary priorities. In our view, documentation/description activities are still sufficiently undervalued in the discipline of linguistics as a whole that even linguists (especially graduate students) who are interested in working in Amazonia sometimes decide not to take a "professional risk" with a long-term commitment to this type of scholarship. Even in linguistic departments like UC Berkeley's or UT Austin's, where commitment to description and documentation is both historically foundational and currently vibrant, graduate students who are primarily interested in these areas encounter structural and even attitudinal obstacles in the course of their training. Post-degree employability is a major concern for students and their advisors alike; normative time expectations and disciplinary conventions regarding what 'counts' as a dissertation topic can strangle documentation and even heavily descriptive projects; and clashes between sub-disciplinary values and priorities can be more corrosive than many of us realize. Moreover, since there are presently no avenues for long-term stable employment as a Language Documentarian, such work is either secondary to teaching or is short-term and project-based, as in the case of post-doctoral positions. Yet the progress that an individual (or even a team) can make documenting a small Amazonian language in a non-urban setting, when limited to academic summers, is discouragingly slow.

Training and expectations for fieldwork. Given the constellation of factors unique to the region, there is a clear need for more field schools in Amazonia; and for more team-based research projects involving *in situ* apprenticeship components. Many challenges that we have discussed here could be effectively addressed in the context of collaborative, 'inter-generational' training opportunities in Amazonia, especially in partnership with local universities in cities like Iquitos or Leticia. Building in more time, academic credit, institutionally-supported programs, durable funding opportunities, and higher standards for focused *in situ* training could transform the quality of both the experience of Amazonian fieldwork and its tangible outputs. Less ambitiously, more and better training within existing field methods courses in areas including cross-cultural sensitivity, participant-observation, ethnography, and archiving would better equip budding Amazonianists with the range of skills they need for creating appropriate, accurate, and interpretable language documentations.

At the same time, because of the conditions specific to documentation work in Amazonia, it seems crucial that basic disciplinary expectations become more realistic regarding how much time, training, and resources are necessary for good documentation work. This is relevant in multiple domains, but especially in gauging how much output a specific field project or fieldwork period is designed to accomplish; how much training researchers get as cross-cultural, multi-lingual fieldworkers; how much time and breadth advisors and students carve out for graduate-level research in Amazonia; how long it 'should' take to write a good dissertation about an Amazonian language; and what kinds of work 'count' toward tenure.

Engaging with the documentation of speech practices and with ethnography. Because speech practices may be variable and even multi-lingual in a single small setting, as is often encountered in Amazonia, the one-language focus that is typically assumed as a standard for documentation is, in some contexts, artificial and not ethnographically appropriate. Similarly, any documentation of an Amazonian language that could be defined as 'comprehensive' will require significant culturally- and socially-contextualizing components. Many linguists now understand the importance of incorporating ethnographic work into their research; similarly, many anthropologists now recognize the methodological flaws of working exclusively through a contact language. At the same time, however, including variation and 'thick description' in documentation introduces significant additional challenges, notably, the need to balance realistic temporal and material constraints on a single project while engaging with the richness that is discovered in the context. Again, these issues exhort us to recalibrate our expectations.

Ethics and collaboration. In the Americas as elsewhere, there is a growing sensibility that linguistics must not be an 'extractive' enterprise. One outcome of this new awareness has been the emergence of more genuinely collaborative efforts between linguists and speech community members. In our view, this is a hugely positive development in the relationship between 'linguistics' and the rest of the world. At the same time, on a practical level, this means that linguists now share control, timelines, resources, outcomes, etc. with their collaborators in ways that often clash with disciplinary expectations and structures. Many collaboration-oriented fieldworkers struggle to integrate the inward-facing facets of academic linguistics with their commitments to responsible outward-facing work, plus the ample time, commitment, dedicated resources, and energy required to do their work well.

Preservation and sharing of documentation. Despite gains in the last twenty years, there is still a great need for educating people about the importance of archiving their materials, as well as exactly how to go about it. This need includes greater attention to regional or national contexts, where people are often hesitant to let materials go into an archive based outside the country, and yet there is no viable local option. The legacy of Amazonian languages depends on more effective dissemination of, and recognition of, the products of good documentation work, so that the data can be better used by non-fieldworking linguists. It also depends on the accessibility and usefulness of these materials to communities, where they may contribute to maintenance and revitalization efforts, and represent a resource for future generations. These considerations underscore the need to build greater recognition for archived materials within the field, as well as for community-directed outputs such as pedagogical materials.

In conclusion, language documentation in Amazonia comes with particular challenges, but also with particular rewards. The region's diversity of languages offers a seemingly endless array of surprises for linguistic theory and typology; cultural differences provide us with new opportunities to discover how human beings engage with their social and ecological worlds; and the documentary enterprise supports speakers in maintaining their heritage and strengthening their position *vis-à-vis* national and global societies. The Amazonian context underscores the need to develop new and more holistic approaches—

both in our thinking and in our methods—that span documentation and description, and to engage them from both linguistic and ethnographic perspectives.

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